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In Search of the Miraculous

A report from the 2016 edition of the Serpentine Gallery's Miracle Marathon

G BY [GILDA WILLIAMS](#) IN [FEATURES](#) | 12 OCT 16



The Serpentine Gallery's annual Marathons might be described as TED Talks with soul. Now in their tenth year, the two-day event sees dozens of fabulous practitioners from all walks of creativity – artists, filmmakers, activists, mathematicians, philosophers, scientists, musicians, performers, poets and more – respond to a single idea, such as Poetry (2009) or Extinction (2014). Organized by Claude Adjil, Lucia Pietroiusti, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Ben Vickers, and presented on the radio by the very skilful Tabitha Thorlu-Bangura, this year's Miracle Marathon offered definitive proof of modern art's estrangement from its Enlightenment origins. In 1748, Scottish philosopher David Hume rejected miracles as 'superstitious delusion' – basically hokum, to be replaced by the empirical promise of science. Fast-forward 268 years to the present day and, on the brink of environmental/economic/social apocalypse, we're ready to try anything.

Reduced to the phony ectoplasmic ghosts of early 20th-century séances, then further downgraded to cheap advertising slogans from Miracle Whip to Miracle Gro (as novelist William Kherbek listed in the accompanying radio programme), the miracle nonetheless can't shake its uneasy Biblical origins. Worrisome religious associations make the devoutly secular art world very jittery. Throughout the weekend participants repeatedly distanced themselves from lingering Christian overtones, such as novelist Andrew O'Hagan's unflattering recollections of the priests populating his childhood in a specially-written piece, *Miracles and Lies*. Gradually taking shape across the two 12-hour sessions was a new, contemporary, 'godless miracle' (Mark Cousins): not quite as secular as the *miracolo Italiano* – the sudden economic transformation of post-war Italy – but not exactly loaves and fishes either.



Hans Ulrich Obrist and Sophia Al-Maria; photograph: © Lewis Ronald

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When overused, 'miracle' risked lapsing into a vague catchall for adjacent terms – 'magic', 'superstition', 'religion', 'mystery'. Like 'uncanny' a few years back, 'miraculous' could be meaninglessly sprinkled into every third sentence in the effort to steer wayward speakers back on track. The best contributors, however, took on the daunting task of defining the weird and unique properties of a 'miracle': the most cosmic, yet most suspect, of all earthly phenomena. As philosopher Federico Campagna explained, a miracle must be witnessed, and – like alchemy – involves some inexplicable, beneficial material transformation. A miracle must come as a surprise; repeat miracles lose impact. Miracles must be silent and effortless: when weaving miracles, remember to avoid excessive strain and wordiness. Miracles are time-sensitive; much of what our laptops and smart phones accomplish regularly today would have been worshipped in the past as miraculous feats, scientist Riccardo Sabatini noted. A miracle is specific in its purpose – say, giving sight to the blind, the 'go-to miracle-of-miracles', as artist Sophia Al-Maria described it. Yet a miracle must simultaneously point towards forces on a universal scale (Simon Schaffer) – or at least be interpreted this way, Timothy Morton reminded us.

Miracles are a form of communication, speaking of signs and wonder within a special semiotic system (Cousins). Jalal Toufic offered an especially probing analysis of the miracle as not merely disturbing boundaries between what is known and what is seen, but collapsing distances between bodies. For example, Dracula's impossible immortality is best confirmed in person, as Jonathan Harker observes – when finally close enough to his undead nemesis to share a mirror – that the vampire is absent in their reflection. And don't even start on the doubting St Thomas, who placed his hand into Christ's side in order to *see* – rather than feel – the miracle of resurrection, thus blurring the senses while confirming the insuperable distance between his own human flesh and the divine body before him.



Genesis P-Orridge; photograph: © Yousef Eldin

But usually conversation fell considerably closer to earth. One recurring theme was impending environmental disaster and the sensation that we've recently passed an ecological tipping point: our planet, now, can only be saved by a miracle. As Genesis P-Orridge – the most remarkable among the weekend's performers – decried, any on-going belief in miracles today reflects hapless inertia, not faith. Surely *some* miracle will come all along to sort out this mess! The possibility of negative miracles was speculated by many. For South African human rights activist Kumi Naidoo the real miracle isn't, say, the overcoming of apartheid with relatively little bloodshed. The most flagrant 'miracle' was the open crime of reckless bankers, bailed out by the very taxpayers they'd cheated and then rewarded with end-of-year bonuses, no less. Why turn water into wine when you can order champagne?

Occasionally miracles seemed literally performed, such as 81-year old Christo leaping about the stage with Roberto Benigni-levels of buoyant energy. And all was forgiven when a speaker went delightfully off-topic – such as media theorist Jussi Parikka's fascinating paper about younger generations inheriting a planet full of holes, from abandoned mines to purposeless buried cables in a wireless world, from heaving sewers to crowded undergrounds.

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Tabitha Thorlu-Bangura; photograph: © Yousef Eldin

Theorist and art historian Jacqueline Rose offered among the most scholarly papers, re-interpreting Nicolas Poussin's painting *The Crossing of the Red Sea* (1632-34), which shows Moses leading the Israelites into safety thanks to God's parting of the sea while the Pharaoh's army are swept away by the returning waters. In Poussin's hands, however, victor and victims are indistinguishable, equally perishing in the waves or struggling on land. For Rose, human frailty lies at the centre of any miracle – whether the still-awaited resolution for Palestine, or overcoming the waters that divide the jungle of Calais from the promised shores of England, all the more unattainable today thanks to Brexit. A related point was touched upon by the eminent historian Simon Schaffer, for whom discourses on miracles and on science share a common concern with securing borders. Not only is maintaining frontiers of special relevance today but all 'magical thinking', Schaffer explains, is defined by the claim that 'what seems ... to be a boundary is, in fact, permeable.'

The verb 'miracling', Rose explained, is a recent neologism that updates the term from a singular, passively received event to an active, ongoing attitude. When Thorlu-Bangura asked the musician Leafcutter John, 'What do you do when you're not making miracles?', he replied casually: 'Nothing. Making miracles is a full-time job.'

Lead image: Adrián Villar Rojas performing as part of Miracle Marathon Day 2, Second Home, London, 9 October 2016; photograph: © Yousef Eldin

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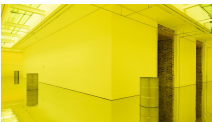


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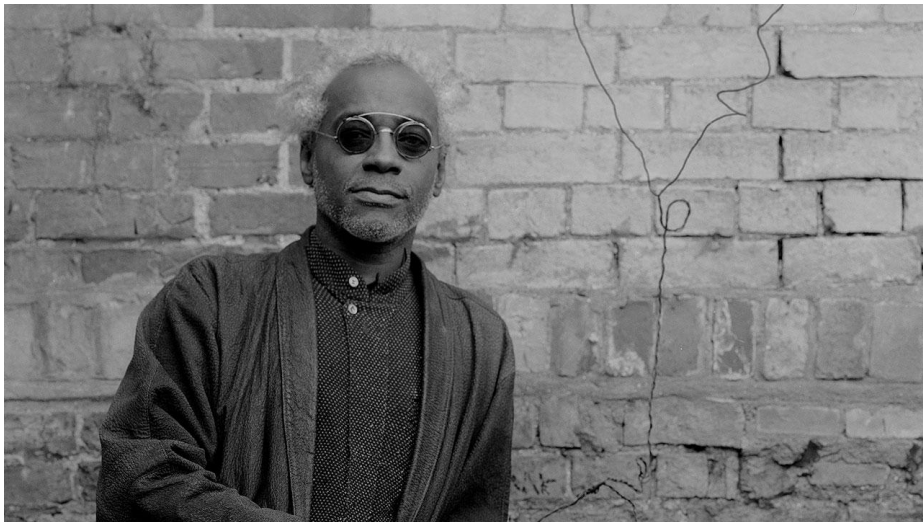
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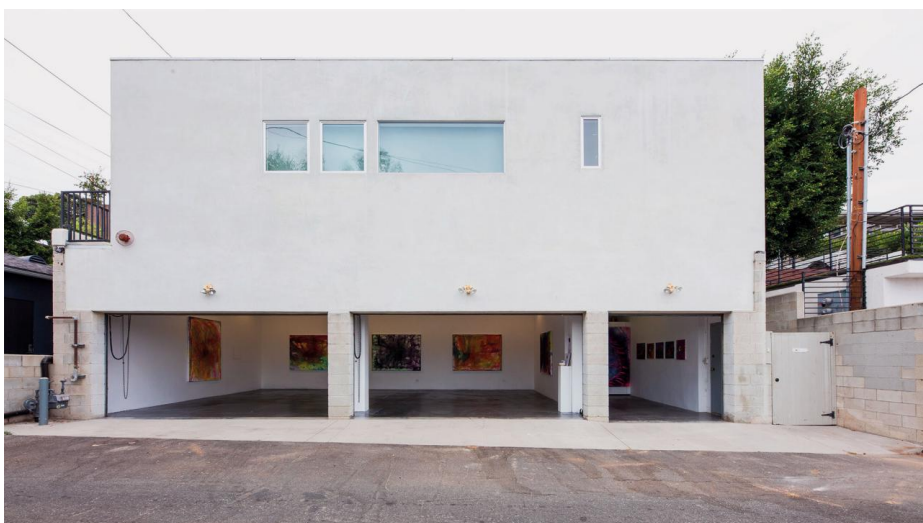
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